

Washington Report

Secret Government?

By Robert R. Brunr

Going up in an elevator in the Central Intelligence Agency building we overheard this fragment of conversation: "Cobras? No trouble at all. Never saw a cobra during the whole stay."

Newspaper reporters were being escorted (one guide for each man) to the CIA's first press conference. Subject: the Soviet Union's faltering economy. That scrap of talk was a proper introduction to a cloak and dagger organization whose task of assembling information is for the most part mundane.

But merely to enter the heavily guarded precincts and then go deep into the agency's formidable looking buildings did give reporters at least a few moments of subdued excitement.

The taxi driver coming over from Washington only knew that the CIA pile was "near McLean," in Virginia. We wandered about a bit and a gas station attendant said, "You missed. It's back on Highway 123 more than a mile. Look for a federal sign."

The sign was there all right, almost lost to sight against the woods. But it didn't say "Central Intelligence Agency." It only cryptically hinted. Soon we were walking down corridors wide enough to take two-way automobile traffic. Everything looked sanitary and unimaginative. It could have been the inside of any one of Washington's federal labyrinths, except for the width of the halls which are rivaled only in the Pentagon.

We found ourselves in a medium-sized room with gray walls dominated by a long light oak table for about 20 people. The chairs were upholstered in a tawny plastic. Once a week this chaste room houses a meeting of the nation's responsible intelligence chiefs, presided over by CIA director John A. McCone, whose purpose is to coordinate United States intelligence. Around the table are usually the State Department's Director of Research and Intelligence Thomas L. Hughes; CIA Representative Lt. Gen. Marshall Carter; Air Force Lt. Gen. Joseph Carroll, acting for the Defense Intelligence Agency; Maj. Gen. Edgar C. Dolman for the Army; Admiral Rufus Taylor for the Navy; Brig. Gen. Jack Thomas for the Air Force; Air Force Lt. Gen. Gordon A. Blake for the National Security Agency; Charles Reichardt for the AEC; and Alan Belmont for the FBI.

On this occasion the newsmen were not on the edge of their seats, for the substance of the briefing had leaked earlier. With a wry grin one of the top officers of the CIA sat down at the head of the table to begin a back-and-forth session on Nikita Khrushchev's economic troubles that lasted more than an hour and a half.

He began by saying, "unaccustomed as I am to public speaking. . . ." The sally brought a laugh.

He apologized for the fact that economics is rather a dismal science and he hoped that we wouldn't find the gathering too stuffy. With professorial understatement he said that the CIA had some interest in American security and in the weaknesses and strengths of the Soviet Union.

As he turned to the subject at hand, what interested the reporters around the table was that the CIA was coming out in broad daylight for the first time without hiding behind the device of "no attribution to any official source." The affable official at the head of the table said the CIA could be quoted directly. This was a revolutionary departure from CIA practice.

As earlier reports in this newspaper have indicated, one reason the CIA publicly described in such detail the Soviet Union's dreary failure in agriculture and its impressive consequences was that Mr. Khrushchev badly needs more flexible credit, and together with the State Department the CIA doesn't want him to get it.

For the CIA to take this public step to influence national opinion has deeply disturbed some elements in the State Department. They fear CIA is moving into State's historic province of shaping United States foreign policy.

Facts are the business of the CIA, they insist.

The CIA has more than 10,000 people devoted to amassing information and is spending for this purpose probably twice the amount spent annually by the State Department. Its economists, an official told us, "have more data than anyone else in the world" on the Soviet economy. The staff is made up of highly trained technicians and draws on the best of the academic community as well.

He smiled and said, "Maybe the Soviet Union will learn something from this data. They deliberately fudge data but they also make unintentional distortions. Premier Khrushchev may welcome outside analysis."

Several hundred CIA people had spent weeks preparing this analysis of Moscow's economic dilemma. "The Kremlin leadership for several years has been trying to do too much with too few resources," said the CIA official at the head of the table who was very much at ease.

Beyond the administration's drive to keep the Soviets in an economic box and to bar long-term credits there are other reasons for CIA's first press conference. CIA officials have long been concerned by the suspicion and uneasiness with which the American people view the agency's work.

Behind this feeling lies the question phrased by Harry Howe Ransom,

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one of the few close students of the CIA: "How shall a democracy insure that its secret intelligence apparatus becomes neither a vehicle for conspiracy nor a suppressor of the traditional liberties of democratic self-government?"

Because the CIA has "tons of facts" they do have power, and the agency is a new phenomenon in American politics. So CIA is doubly questioned by other power centers in the government and among the citizenry.

Behind CIA's first press conference could well be a desire to support its indispensable work by improving the agency's image before the public, showing that much of its work is the analysis of facts and that this is being done successfully.

Other CIA press conferences, or briefings, are expected. "Why not?" asked one of the CIA men flanked against one wall. He said that "the rule of reason" could be applied to the release of CIA data. Some significant stories do not need to be kept secret, he implied, even if clandestine means are used in part to support the facts released.

The question now is what reaction there will be both among the general public and in government circles. Is this a proper role for CIA to play? What should its relationship to the State Department, the White House and the public be? Can it properly remove its cloak where daggers are not concerned?